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Thirty-one 4-year-old Negro boys attending a research preschool in Chicago were observed during a play session. Preliminary evaluation of the data from the observations indicated a marked heterogeneity in the subjects with regard to verbal facility, cognitive development, and quality and nature of object relationships. Poor correlation was found between degree of verbal facility and level of cognitive development. The children fell into three groups: (1) probable future academic achievers, (2) probable non-achievers, and (3) difficult-to-predict. Group (1) showed concern over state-appropriate developmental issues, a minimum of conflict regarding earlier stages, and a capacity to move toward an integrative resolution, and showed superior cognitive differentiation. Group (2) manifested minimal concern over development, substantial conflicts regarding earlier stages, and disintergration. Group (3) showed varying degrees to both good and bad characteristics. There is wide variation in the individual personality development of the disadvantaged. Explanations of underachievement, measured only by cognitive and/or language factors, is adequate. There is a great need for study on the relationship of the socialization process during the first four years of life to later academic achievement. (WD)

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Personality Development in Disadvantaged Four-Year-Old Boys: Observations with Play Techniques*

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Introduction

There has been increasing concern over the academic underachievement of many socially disadvantaged children. This has led to the establishment of a number of preschool enrichment programs (Weikert, 1964; Feldman 1964; Gray and Klaus, 1965) the most publicized of which has been Project Headstart.

In attempting to assess and evaluate these programs, it becomes apparent that they are based upon several assumptions, which may or may not be explicitly stated. One of these central assumptions is drawn by extrapolation from demographic data to individual personalities, and states that since the socially disadvantaged may be relatively homogeneously defined according to a number of gross demographic variables, it is therefore assumed that this group is likewise relatively homogeneous in respect to individual personality development. A second major assumption derived from observational data and experimental study of academic underachievers states that the underachievement is primarily a consequence of cognitive deficiencies which are characteristic of the socially disadvantaged (Hunt, J. McV., 1964; C. Deutsch, 1964; M. Deutsch, 1965).

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The present study was in part undertaken to evaluate some aspects of these assumptions. Our major hypotheses are (1) that academic achievement and underachievement is a multi-determined phenomenon which is integrally related to total individual personality development (Rabinovitch, 1959; Hirsch, 1965); and (2) there are systematic relationships between cognitive development and other aspects of personality functioning. To test these hypotheses we are observing a random sample of socially disadvantaged four-year-old boys attending a half-day preschool program. Although the research is multi-disciplinary and consists of many different sub-projects, today we will report that portion of the study which deals with several aspects of individual personality development as studied through play techniques.

We will present preliminary findings in three areas of personality development: (1) utilization of speech, or verbal facility, (2) cognitive development, and (3) the development of object relations.

The Sample

The sample consists of 31 four-year-old Negro boys living in a public housing project in Chicago's West Side ghetto. They attend a research preschool funded by the Kenneth F. Montgomery Foundation in connection with the Institute for Juvenile Research. All of the children in school were randomly chosen from the list of four-year-olds living in the particular area of the project in which the school is situated; we believe they comprise a representative sample of four-year-olds in this project. The children qualify as being "socially disadvantaged" by the available demographic criteria; namely, median family income (between $3000 and $4000), mean number of children in the family (5.5), the father reported absent from the home in 38% of the families, and median educational level of main support (grade

10). Although there are a total of 68 children enrolled in the school (33 boys and 35 girls), it was decided to include only the boys in the initial phase of the clinical investigation because previous research suggests that different processes are in operation regarding personality functioning in the two sexes at this age (Crandall, 1963), and because the bulk of academic achievement problems occur among males (Hirsch, 1966). Thirty-one of the thirty-three boys in the school were included in the study; the two who were omitted where chronic absentees.

Methodology

Each child is seen in a play session by two white male child psychiatrists, which lasts an average of forty minutes. The subject is introduced by one of the examiners (E1) to a room with play materials which usually elicit enthusiastic activity on a number of relevant developmental dimensions. The other examiner (E2) enters about 15 minutes later, and interacts with the child by providing several structured tasks. The sessions are tape recorded, and detailed supplementary notes are taken by two observers looking through the one-way mirror. The two examiners and two observers meet immediately following the observation of the child to discuss the interaction and its interpretation. A narrative account of the process of the verbal and non-verbal encounters is later produced by one of the observers, who is not clinically trained. This summary is later evaluated and scored through the use of rating scales.

Results and Discussion

Although our study is constructed so as to permit us to draw upon data from a multiplicity of sources, e.g. social history, classroom behavior, school performance, peer relationships, etc., the data to be presented herein is derived solely from the clinical play interview. Preliminary evaluation

of our data suggests that there is marked heterogeneity among our subjects in regard to verbal facility, cognitive development, and quality and nature of object relationships.

The subjects' verbal facility was evaluated both quantitatively and qualitatively. The qualitative evaluation was based on sentence structure, vocabulary, and pronunciation. The quantitative evaluation reflected the total amount of speech during the interview session.

Quality of speech among the children varied from excellent to poor. On the other hand, with only a few exceptions, the group was low in quantity of speech. Many of the children displaying a minimum quantity of speech had acceptable quality of speech.

The subjects' cognitive development was assessed from observation of their play with relatively standard items. The play was evaluated in regard to form, order, sequence, and the capacity to communicate meaning.

Our subjects were broadly distributed throughout the range of cognitive development from excellent to poor. Of particular interest is the observation that about one-third of our subjects demonstrated cognitive capacities which could be rated equal to those of their competent age mates from non-advantaged sub-cultures.

There was a poor correlation between degree of verbal facility and the level of cognitive development. Some children, exhibiting little speech, demonstrated through their play good to excellent cognitive development. There were a few children who produced a large quantity of speech and who had poor cognitive differentiation.

The quality and nature of the subjects' object relationships were evaluated through many observations of the child's play with doll figures and

other toys, and through the nature of his engagement with the examiners. Particular attention was paid to the child's modes of establishing and maintaining contact; including physical modality, direct eye contact, mirror contact, facial and other means of non-verbal expression, as well as verbal interactions. The observations also include consideration of the quality and quantity of affects as they are elaborated over time; the quality of self-object differentiation and age-appropriate sex differentiation; and his apparent expectations of approval and disapproval. For convenience and brevity we utilized the developmental framework of Erik Erikson (Erikson, 1963), in which the body zone and psychosocial modality used by the child are placed into a framework of chronologically-biased developmental expectations. The subject is evaluated on this developmental scale, with particular attention paid to the extent of conflict-free areas of functioning. Furthermore, an assessment is made of the predominant developmental level of expressed conflicts, the quality and nature of attempted resolutions, and the resultant move toward integration or disintegration.

Utilizing these frames of reference our subjects fall into three groups:

(1) The first is a small group of boys who show concern over stage-appropriate developmental issues, a minimum of conflict regarding earlier stages, and a capacity to move toward an integrative resolution, with a relatively large segment of conflict-free functioning. Without exception, these boys demonstrate superior cognitive differentiation, although they may or may not demonstrate verbal facility. In the preschool classroom these children are considered to be probable future academic achievers.

(2) The second group is also small. These boys show minimal concerns over stage-appropriate developmental issues, a preponderance of conflicts

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regarding earlier stages, a tendency toward disintegration and a virtual absence of conflict-free functions. Without exception, these children demonstrate minimal cognitive differentiation, although they, too, may or may not demonstrate verbal facility. In the preschool these boys are considered probable future academic non-achievers.

(3) The third group is numerically the largest, and the most difficult to characterize. These boys demonstrate concerns over stage-appropriate developmental issues as well as conflicts regarding earlier stages, varying capacities to move toward an integrative resolution, but with minimal segments of conflict-free functioning. They show varying degrees of both cognitive differentiation and verbal facility, and through observation of their behavior in preschool it is difficult to predict their level of probable future academic success.

The third group presents the greatest challenge, in that further observation may provide some understanding of the process of development of these various aspects of personality and their interrelationships. Hopefully this might lead to the emergence of techniques to foster integrative solutions and promote conflict-free functioning, both of which characterize "the future achiever" (Group 1).

Conclusions

On the basis of the above-described study, we conclude the following:

1. There is wide variation in the individual personality development of socially-disadvantaged preschool boys.

2. Explanations of academic underachievement among the disadvantaged which take into account only cognitive and/or language factors appear to be inadequate and incomplete.

3. The study of total individual personality functioning, including assessments of developmental levels and object relationships, as well as the more-frequently-studied cognitive and language factors, is necessary for a fuller understanding of the process of development among the so-called disadvantaged.

4. There is a great need for further elaboration of our knowledge regarding the relationship of the socialization process during the first four years of life to later academic achievement and future life outcome.

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